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The rhizomatic artistic practice of Fabrice Hybert

Questions such as "what is art's place within the wider context of visual culture" are often posed today, even though ever since Thierry de Duve's book *Kant after Duchamp* (1996) we should know that behind these culturally motivated inquiries there lies a fundamental theoretical question about the concept of art in the twentieth century. One of De Duve's crucial insights is that art has given up its specificity in order to come to terms with culture's generality. Yet in contrast to many presumptions about art's transcendence within visual culture, De Duve's epistemological shift can only be adequately understood within the discourse on art, or, more precisely, aesthetics. To say it differently: modern art's shift from the specific to the generic does not simply imply the idea of 'anything goes.' Rather the contrary: ~~asking the question about the precise concept of art~~ ^{it} suggests that art has to constantly absorb a multi-faceted, always changing visual culture within the boundaries of its own discourse. As an advocate of art as a strong conceptual and historical discipline in its own right, I want to demonstrate that art does not need a special defense against the forces that want to blend it with the wider ~~discourse on visual culture~~ ^{discourse on visual culture}. To demonstrate this argument, I suggest a theoretical analysis ^{of one} ~~of one~~ contemporary artist only: Fabrice Hybert. Since the early 1990s, this French artist has dealt exactly with culture's generality through the discipline of art. In addition, his work exemplifies many contemporary discourses, from the formless of Rosalind Krauss to Rem Koolhaas's recent theoretical insistence on 'shopping' as a contemporary condition. Given the topicality and theoretical relevance of Hybert's work, I will, therefore, try to formulate some principles underlying his artistic practice, but 'at work' in contemporary culture 'at large.'

^{shows} ~~Traduction~~ is a gigantic piece of soap travelling on the back of a truck around Europe along commercial centers, where it is unpacked and shown as if it were a promotional product. One of its journeys is registered on a video of about ten minutes, which is exhibited as documentary evidence in various art centers and museums. I have always considered this early work (1991) by Fabrice Hybert as a blueprint for his later artistic

production. This because the main principles underlying his oeuvre were already present in this work: first the idea to take commerce as a model for artistic production, and second a radical rethinking of the very notion of form. To demonstrate how these principles operate in Hybert's oeuvre, I will begin with an analysis of *Traduction*.

Generally, a bar of soap is just an ordinary commodity object which can be bought in every supermarket, but in Hybert's case it is blown up to such a scale, (it made the Guinness books of records!) that it transcends being an ordinary object for everyday use and becomes an extraordinary object for display. This tension between the commodity object and the aesthetic object is also evident in this video 'about' the soap, which confronts the viewer with the epistemological question of why this extra-ordinary soap travelling on the road should be called art in the first place. What Hybert adds to this discourse, that started with Duchamp's 'transportation,' so to speak, of a ~~jo~~erinal into an art context, is implied by the title *Traduction*: a translation is marked by a transitory aspect, or, in the ~~original~~ Latin meaning of the term, by the fact that it is *translatus*, 'carried across.' It is exactly this aspect of transitoriness that interests Hybert. Whereas Duchamp brought an ordinary object into an art context by substituting it for the aesthetic object, Hybert takes the possibility of this substitution as a given on the basis of Duchamp's legacy, postulating that any object can smoothly glide back and forth between codes of meaning. Here it is interesting that the Latin root of translation (*transferro* - *translatum*) is a descendent of the Greek *metaphorein*, a word that in its original meaning signifies 'transport.' Hybert's postulate that any 'cross over' of objects from one context to another is primarily a question of translation, may seem a logical consequence of Duchamp's radical act of putting an urinal within an art context, but it goes ~~be~~jond this relatively simple transportation -- it results in different concept of form.

Precisely Hybert's subversion of form is the second reason why *Traduction* is so important within his oeuvre. The soap is a successful 'translation' of one of the artist's major artistic statements about *Le Fin de l'Object Fini* -- the end of the finite object. Because of its slippery substance, the soap bar is what Hybert, with a typically French literal sense of wordplay, calls an *objet de glissement*, that is, 'a slippery object', an object which escapes configuration into a definite form (*l'object fini*): it glides between forms, much as an ordinary soap may slip through one's fingers. *Glissement* is a term for the principally formless nature of things, for objects not in a state of permanent 'thingness' but of a transient 'in-between-ness.' Because of this slippery nature, Hybert's

soap bar may be **associated** with *l'informe* as conceptualized by Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss in their book *Formless, A User's Guide* (1998). Staying close to Bataille's circumscription of the formless as "a universe which resembles nothing" but "something like a spider or a spit", the authors' interpretation of the formless is subtly playing with the double meaning of the word in French: the '*informe*' *informs* the work -- it is not so much formless *because* it resembles nothing (or something), but because its formal appearance is essentially un-specific. It could look quite different and still be the same -- it is *informed* by its formal undecidedness. At first glance Hybert's soap seems to have little to do with the formless, because its appearance is close to the white modernist cube. Then there is an allusion to **clensing** literally opposed to Bataille's "low down matter." Yet it does share a similar drive to undermine the modernist idealist form, **all be it** by an interesting paradox: on the one hand Hybert's soap bar represents modernism's purism both on a formal and a symbolic level, on the other hand it desublimates this form by its latent ability to change into another 'form' by its dissolvable material property.

The Hybertmarché

Hybert's reflections on the status of art in relation to the commodity object, and the tension between form and the *informe*, which are conceptualized in 'Traduction', are transformed into systematic structuring principles in "1-1=2", or, as this work from 1995 is usually known, the "Hybertmarché." The concept of this controversial show was simple: Hybert transformed the entire U-formed space of the first floor of the Musée d'art contemporaine in Paris into a **very**ble shopping mall, where a wide range of commodity products were sold to the public. The result was remarkable: old Parisien ladies, attracted in flocks by the discount prices of Hybert's products, **filed** along the tables filling their shoppingbags, outnumbering the regular contemporary art public. By infiltrating the museum with a supermarket, Hybert directed his reflections on the relationship between the commodity object and the aesthetic object into another direction: a critique of the museum. This can be read as another consequence of Duchamp's gesture to place commodity object in the museum, but Hybert's act is grounded in a different hypothesis, namely that art is conditioned, not by art's autonomy, or its context, but by economic enterprise -- "*dans le sens général du terme <<commerce-échange>>.*" Here one has to think of Baudrillard's critical analysis in the 1980s of the museum (the Centre Pompidou) as a superficial "cultural supermarket," or *hypermarché*. Baudrillard critiques the far-reaching influence of commodity culture on

culture in general, warning for the hypermarket as "a model for "future controlled socialization." About twenty years after Baudrillard's essay, Fabrice Hybert literally introduces "the hyperreality of merchandise" into the museum, however transforming Baudrillard's morale about the museum: rather than a critique on its status as a capitalist institution determined by the market, *Hybert* insists that the museum should incorporate this condition of the commercial exchange-, and acknowledge that it has become an "*activité fondamentale de l'artiste*." Thus he is structurally employing the principle of commerce-echange, the trans-action, in the Hybertmarché.

Parallel to this exchange principle, the postulate of the formless, which we have encountered in *Traduction*, is also transformed into a structuring principle in the Hybertmarché. Here we have to switch from Rosalind Krauss and Yves Alain Bois' conception of the formless to Deleuze's comprehensive theory of the rhizome, which is essentially another take at the idea of formlessness. So what is a rhizome? How does the rhizome assume its diverse forms, spreading out in all directions, forming all sorts of "excessive and ill-digested knots with bulbs and tubers," as Deleuze writes? According to Deleuze, the rhizome involves six principles, namely heterogeneity, connection, multiplicity, a-signifying rupture, cartography, and, finally, what they have termed "decalcomania". It goes too far to discuss these principles here in detail, suffice to say that all principles underlying the *Hybertmarché* flow with a great degree of naturalness from Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic thought. The rhizomatic conception of the show is already emphasized in a small text which the visitor encounters before entering the exhibition, informing that all the objects in the show are derived from Hybert's drawings. The importance of this artistic statement, with respect to the idea of the rhizome, is that the objects, without reproducing the drawings, are nevertheless linked to them through a process of transformation, which is a rhizomatic operation: no product functions as discrete artistic object, but they are all part of intricately linked transfers, from drawings to objects to products to situations. Furthermore, if there is one principle which has **determinant** the highly diverse collection of products in the *Hybertmarché*, then it are interrelated principles of heterogeneity and connection. During the show a plethora of seemingly unconnected objects was neatly arranged on large tables, including an enormous stuffed lion, one-wheel bicycles, recycled writing materials, all kinds of drinking cups and glasses, garden tools, kitchenware, toys, musical instruments, wigs and shop window dummies. This great variety of objects in often unusual juxtapositions, not only exhausted all classificatory taxonomies of existing supermarkets and department

stores, but "connected" generally discrete "signifying systems" or contexts. In line with Deleuze's thought, the main rhizomatic operation is multiplication. It is set into motion through the flow of merchandise from the tables into the shopping carts to the homes of the buyers, in which each product can be connected, ruptured, modified by its unknown destiny. So even if the objects are formally arranged on the tables, they are always in a state of becoming, of transformations without an end -they refuse to become *objets finis*.

alternative esthetics

Even if the rhizomatic structure of the *Hybertmarché*, and the axiomatic formlessness of its contents, are apparent in almost every aspect of its conception, Hybert is not merely applying Deleuze's theory of the rhizome as a method to organize his show. So an **analysis** of the way in which the rhizomatic structuring principles are operating in his artistic practice, activated by the commercial exchange, only constitutes a first reading of the artist's work through the Deleuze's thought. A second, more fundamental, reading addresses the artist's radical critique of the classic triangle of the artist, the artwork and the viewing subject, in search for an alternative aesthetic model. As for the concept of the artwork, it must be more than clear by now that Hybert replaces the modernist myth of the idealist form by the Deleuzian idea of rhizomatic 'formations'. But Hybert's proclamation of the *object fini*, and his insistence on the *commerce-échange* principle, also have significant implications for how the artist and the beholder are viewed with respect to the work. In contrast to the classic concept of the artist as creator, or the Marxist concept of the artist as producer, Hybert proposes the artist as generator, who activates the process of exchange between what Deleuze terms "variously formed matters" - be they objects or viewing subjects - thus stimulating series of calculated or randomly accomplished relations, or 'formations'. The spectator too, disguised as consumer, has a different role to play: his passive, uni-directional gaze is replaced by an active exchange of "**resiprocal** looks", as Lacan says, between objects and subject in a shopping mall. Object and subject mutually seduce each other, changing places, so to speak, constantly. This **dilloetsjun** of the classic dichotomy between subject and object, which is also implicit in Deleuze's rhizomatic thought, constitutes the basis of Hybert's reformulation of the relationship between artwork, artist and spectator.

My hypothesis is, that in analogy to Deleuze's "alternative thought," Hybert suggests an 'alternative' aesthetics. Deleuze confronts the metaphysical model of thought, firmly

grounded in essentially mimetic concepts such as recognition and representation, with an alternative model of thought without, as he claims, any preconception. Deleuze's critique is generally directed to metaphysics, since all the metaphysical models since Plato, thus Deleuze, "crush thought under an image which is that of the Same and the Similar in representation, but profoundly betrays what it means to Think!" In analogy to Deleuze's questioning of a preconceptual image behind metaphysical thought, Hybert can be seen as critiquing the dominance of the "Same and Similar" model for aesthetics. Not for nothing, Hybert stresses in his short explanatory text at the entrance of the Hybertmarché that his drawings, partly sketched before the show, and partly drawn under the tables during the show, do not constitute a representational method but a means to visualize thought. Not for nothing, Hybert stresses in his short explanatory text at the entrance of the Hybertmarché that his drawings, partly sketched before the show, and partly drawn under the tables during the show, do not constitute a representational method but a means to visualize thought. The concepts expressed through the drawings and the products derived from them are constantly engaged in a dialectic exchange, so that the classic dichotomy between concept and matter (drawing versus object) reveals itself as being two sides of the same coin within Hybert's rhizomatic procedure. So Hybert, by 'using' Deleuzian rhizomatics as the main structuring principle for his supermarket is attacking the very same metaphysical models of representation and recognition as Deleuze, but from the point of view of aesthetics, since the aesthetic logic behind the actors within the classic triangle are suspended, they are constantly shifting position, constantly "establishing" fields of "relations," in the words of Nicolas Bourriaud, a spokesman for art which emerged the 1990s.

Bourriaud's book *Relational Esthetics*, as far as I know, is the only theoretical **endèavour** in the 1990s, which tries to come to terms with these constantly shifting roles of the artist and the relational processes he generates or is involved in. The first presupposition behind his theory for contemporary art practice consists of a critique of the modernist *beauté formelle*, which, importantly, 'frees' the new aesthetics from its dependence on the object. 'Beauty,' in other words, can not only be established by forms, but also, in Bourriaud's words, by establishing "relations" with the world, either in a material or an immaterial form. However, Bourriaud reduces his aesthetics to a social theory about art, **interpreting** most of his protagonists almost exclusively within the social sphere. In the case of Hybert, Bourriaud acknowledges that he "defines art as a social function among others." Exactly these other characteristics, which I have tried to formulate here, show

the theoretical promise of Bourriaud's project, **bejont** advocating a mere justification of social engaged art. They are already sufficiently present in the two relatively early works by Fabrice Hybert which I have therefore analyzed here, but one could go on demonstrating these same principles in the impressive "oeuvre pluriforme" across the boundaries of disciplines that the artist has 'generated' since: from sculpture, painting, video, drawing and performance, to commercial interventions such as the cultural supermarket and other important exhibition such as TESTOO (where the logical conclusion of the axiomatic formula is artistically translated in the ironic yet precise formula of the POF (*prototype object en fonctionnement*)) and even a television broadcasting event in the prize-winning French pavilion at the Venice Biennale, the programming of which was once again the result of an interactive and improvisational process with his conceptual drawings, all of which were published in a big green box by way of a catalogue. What I have tried to explore are the rhizomatic principles at work in Hybert's artistic practice in order to arrive at a conceptual framework for understanding Hybert's *oeuvre pluriforme*. Hybert's position in the **debate** between art's generality and its specificity constitutes a radical shift away from art's autonomy, through the guerilla tactic of the *glissement*. Yet, although Hybert is working with culture's generality, he remains, clearly and deliberately, within the discourse of art.